Reflections and Reviews

An English Teacher Looks at Branding

JAMES B. TWITCHELL*

About 15 years ago I was teaching a survey course in Romantic poetry, and some student asked why the course was a requirement for graduation. I explained the importance of cultural literacy as a goal of school-based education.

To show them how common knowledge worked, I said that at the end of the nineteenth century almost any literate person could fill in the blank in this sentence: “My heart leaps up when I behold a [blank] in the sky.” Who today can fill in that missing blank? My students stared blankly, just as I would have done at their age. Well, I puffed, the missing word is “rainbow,” and it is an important line from Wordsworth, and an important line in English Romanticism, and an important line in Christian culture. So there, you little philistines! Take that!

No matter. They just sat there. This was not going to change their lives. However, my life was about to change. It happened in a heartbeat. From the back row a kid who always wore a baseball hat backward erupted: “My heart leaps up, Professor Twitchell, when I behold golden arches in the sky.” The class howled in glee. Touché.

If having a culture means sharing stories, Baseballcap was saying, here it is. Come and get it. OK, it is a culture not centered on a covenant with God but with a meat patty; still, you get the point. He never said another word that semester. He did not have to. In the never-ending battle between instructor and pupil, Baseballcap had scored a technical knockout.


A BRAND IS A CULTURAL STORY, WELL, KIND OF . . .

Baseballcap’s culture is built on a commercial variant of storytelling called branding. While I realize that to readers of the Journal of Consumer Research a brand means many different things—most of them quite sophisticated—to me a brand is simply a story attached to a manufactured object. As you remember from Lit 101, stories are fictions filled with character, plot, points of view, and an implied purpose called a meaning. Early stories announced this purpose with an attached moral, as with Aesop’s Fables or biblical parables. Often, however, the purpose of a story is to generate a feeling or emotional response in the listener. Such stories usually rise to some kind of climax. Almost everyone can recall an Edgar Allan Poe story (The Pit and the Pendulum, The Tell-Tale Heart, The Fall of the House of Usher, . . . ) simply in terms of the sensation. While stories can start in any number of places, they usually end by delivering that emotional punch. Sometimes they start ab ovo, sometimes in media res, and sometimes they even go backward, but the key to appreciating stories is often overlooked: stories often carry emotions as meaning. In a sense, we learn how to think and feel by hearing stories.

One of the traits of a good story is that it can easily get concentrated into just a sentence or two—the gist. One of the reasons that study guides like Monarch or Cliff Notes are the staple of every schoolboy (and the bane of every instructor) is that powerful stories often have easily expressed kernels, hyperconcentrated plots. Lousy stories are unfocused. They have no center. Good ones often whirl around a small nucleus.

What of these: a young man unwittingly slays his father and marries his mother. A Moorish prince is tormented by suspicions of his white bride’s infidelity. A curmudgeonly old skinflint is humanized by a trio of apparitions on Christmas Eve. A staid gentleman-scientist performs an experiment on himself that turns him into a libidinous monster. An ordinary man wakes up one morning to discover that he has been transformed into a cockroach. A savvy lad rafts down a river with a black slave. An obsessed man chases a whale while his crew suffers.

© 2004 by JOURNAL OF CONSUMER RESEARCH, Inc. • Vol. 31 • September 2004
All rights reserved. 0093-5301/2004/3102-0022$10.00
In academic lingo, the ability of a story to be expressed in a single kernel is called a holophrasm. It reduces sentences to a word, for example, or complex ideas to a nubbin. Oddly enough, great art tends to be holophrastic. So too with great brands. The brand gathers its power because it concentrates what is called in adspeak "ownership."

As opposed to the high-art story that usually is stabilized in print, the brand story is fluid. Often this story can occur visually, which demonstrates the power of a logo. We all know the golden arches, the Texaco star, Lucky Strike bull’s-eye, Shell’s shell, the Holiday Inn sign, the Playboy bunny, Nike’s swoosh, the CBS eye, the Red Cross, or the Rolls Royce swooping woman. Sometimes we find the kernel inside a tune. Remember the percolating sound of Maxwell House coffee, Coke’s “I’d Like to Teach the World to Sing,” McDonald’s “You Deserve a Break Today,” the Cable News Network war music, the Teabury shuffle, or a cat food’s “Meow, Meow, Meow” song?

Sometimes the kernel will be colored. Not only do we know the difference between Pepsi blue and Coke red, we know Pepsi blue is not Tiffany blue, Kleenex blue, or IBM blue, and Coke red is not Marlboro red, which is not Heinz red or Budweiser red. We know the difference between Hertz yellow, Kodak yellow, Sunoco yellow, and Caterpillar yellow, between Heineken green and John Deere green. We know Hershey’s brown makes sense, while UPS’s brown really makes no sense. One is brown of chocolate while the other is brown of . . . well, that is the problem.

Often brand kernels often reside in identification characters whose generating story is elsewhere. Here we can really appreciate how close brand narratives are to folktales. Consider these brand stories simply in terms of their provenances. We recognize the archetypes as they migrate from Greek mythology like Hermes carrying flowers for FTD, from folklore like the Keebler elves living in the Hollow Tree, from cartoon town like Poppin’ Fresh (the Pillsbury Doughboy), from the world of half-human/half cartoon like Ronald McDonald, from our human world like the Marlboro man, from animals made human like Charlie the Tuna, or from the natural world like the Exxon tiger.

THE CONCEPT OF GENRE

Because literary stories are so various we have developed a rather sophisticated system for classification based on affect. What emotion do they promise? For instance, if you want to cry, you read stories called sentimental romances. If you want the hair on the nape of your neck to be lifted, you pick up a horror story from a tradition called the gothic. This phenomenon of stories fitting into emotion-delivering formats is called “genre.”

In the modern world of commercial storytelling we have developed the same kind of story variation but have not yet developed an understanding of brand genres. So we know what a beer ad feels like, we know the hushed confidentiality of feminine product advertising, we recognize the way that luxury cars are displayed, and we know the music that accompanies chewing gum or chocolate candy.

We are so sophisticated about advertising genres that we know the difference between Coke and Pepsi advertising, or between McDonald’s and Burger Chef, between Levi’s and Diesel, Nike and Adidas. We do not know ingredient differences, but we know genre differences. What we lack, and what we will no doubt develop over the next generations, is a critical apparatus that lets us appreciate conformity and variation in commercial speech as we can now in art speech.

The reason why we have been so slow to appreciate a culture based on commercial storytelling is obvious. It happened so quickly! And it happened with (ugh!) things. Essentially what has happened to stories is that they have jumped loose of individual storytellers and became part of a global cacophony used to distinguish machine-made products. These sagas are now being told everywhere, on every surface, at all times of the day. For this explosion in storytelling to occur—what people in advertising refer to as “clutter” (rather like a doctor shooting up a patient with adrenaline and then complaining that he will not quiet down)—a number of innovations in narrative had to happen. Oddly enough, two of these storytelling developments happened in the high-art period called Romanticism. And so, since that is what I am supposed to be teaching, let’s take a look.

HOW DID BRANDS GET TO BE NARRATIVES?

To understand how stories got attached to manufactured things—branding—we need to appreciate two seemingly unrelated cultural transformations that occurred during the nineteenth century. These crucial shifts in perception are (1) the common acceptance of the pathetic fallacy and (2) the rise of impressionism as a narrative and pictorial device. From a marketing point of view, both innovations transformed not just how stories got told but how the audience could actively participate in the consumption of, first, fictions, and secondarily, material goods. These techniques made modern branding not just possible but inevitable.

Here, oddly enough, the Romantic poets lent a hand. One of the legacies of Romanticism was not that it made feeling into an epistemology (you know it is right because it feels right) but that the poets also made the startling contention that inanimate things and nonhuman life share feeling. The universe is sentient. Admittedly, this is often proffered as a way to shock, but it soon becomes a way to inform and expand consciousness. Even rocks, said Samuel Taylor Coleridge, have feelings. Here is just a bit of the feeling phenomenon as expressed by William Wordsworth in a lyrical ballad called “Lines Written in Early Spring” (Van Doren 2002, pp. 75–76). Unlikely as it may be, the process he limns at the end of the eighteenth century is at the heart of commercial branding.

I heard a thousand blended notes,
While in a grove I sate reclined,
In that sweet mood when pleasant thoughts
Bring sad thoughts to the mind.

To her fair works did Nature link
The human soul that through me ran;
And much it grieved my heart to think
What man has made of man.

Through primrose tufts, in that green bower,
The periwinkle trailed its wreaths;
And 'tis my faith that every flower
Enjoys the air it breathes.

The birds around me hopped and played,
Their thoughts I cannot measure:
But the least motion which they made
It seemed a thrill of pleasure.

The budding twigs spread out their fan,
To catch the breezy air;
And I must think, do all I can,
That there was pleasure there.

If this belief from heaven be sent,
If such be Nature's holy plan,
Have I not reason to lament
What man has made of man?

When Wordsworth states that he believes that flowers enjoy the air, that the birds have thoughts, and that the budding twigs sense pleasure, he is willingly and almost belligerently threatening the concept of rational knowing. This unarticulated paradigm of evaluation—what was called the "Great Chain of Being" in Elizabethan times—essentially orders the values of life for a culture. With the exception of the burst of Romanticism about the time of the French Revolution, it usually excludes sentience from the natural world. Flowers do not have joy, twigs cannot sense pleasure, and birds most certainly do not think.

But Wordsworth did not go far enough. Other poets did. And in so doing they ushered in one of the truly radical shifts in temper, known by the art-historical term "impressionism." While this shift is best seen in oil painting later in the century, we can glimpse it in poetry. Remember Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" from high school days (Barnard 1988, pp. 344-46)? Of course not. In the poem the speaker looks at an ancient urn and starts asking questions of it. First, he wants to know what story is being told on the urn. Young lovers are imaged in frozen pursuit, and he wonders who they are and how they feel. Next, Keats walks around the urn and sees the scene of a priest leading a heifer to some kind of sacrifice. He wonders what religious ceremony is being enacted. Here is his mental interrogatory:

Who are these coming to the sacrifice?
To what green altar, O mysterious priest,

Lead'st thou that heifer lowing at the skies,
And all her silken flanks with garlands drest?
What little town by river or sea-shore,
Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,
Is emptied of its folk, this pious morn?
And, little town, thy streets for evermore
Will silent be; and not a soul, to tell
Why thou art desolate, can e'er return.

Keats is now asking for information that is not on the urn. If the little town were on the urn, he would know if it was up in the hills or down by the seashore. He is starting to animate the urn and give it human characteristics, rather as Wordsworth did with nature when he attributed feeling to birds and flowers. Keats is essentially treating the object like something/someone which/who can respond to his questioning—a thing that can tell a story. He is treating it, in other words, in a singularly modern way—like a brand.

In the final stanza, all the stops are removed, and Keats out-Wordsworths Wordsworth. Here are the lines:

O Attic shape! fair attitude! with brede
Of marble men and maidens overwrought,
With forest branches and the trodden weed;
Thou, silent form! dost tease us out of thought
As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!

When old age shall this generation waste,
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,
"Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."

Any schoolboy appreciates what is going on, at least what appears to be going on. Keats seems to be hearing what the urn is saying. In other words, it talks! And, far more importantly, it seems to say something rather profound although it is enigmatic. But who cares? It is the shock of reciprocity that is startling.

THE PATHETIC FALLACY IS THE TRUTH
OF BRANDING

Why are we not shocked by the Neon ad (fig. 1)? Why don't we immediately shut this kind of communication down? Why does it draw us closer to the car? By the same token, why do we countenance such creatures as Poppin' Fresh, the Pillsbury Doughboy, Mr. Clean, Aunt Jemima, Tony the Tiger, or the Tidy Bowl man who lives in the toilet? Clearly something has happened between Keats and modern advertising. Whatever it is, the process entails all these factors: (1) the storytelling necessity of separating fungible products be they Grecian urns or Wedgwood pottery, (2) the humanizing of the material world in much the same way the Impressionists humanized the natural world, and (3) the willingness to move back and forth between one's self and a work of artistic or commercial creation,
suspending judgment, in hopes of building some kind of relationship.

Colin Campbell, an English sociologist who studies consumption, argues that indeed something happened to the Western imagination in the early nineteenth century to make the application of stories to inanimate objects possible (Campbell 1989). He contends that we essentially stopped rationalizing and started dreaming. After all, that is what Romanticism was all about, the end of the Age of Reason. And, as the objects of our dreams became material not ethereal, we started to spiritualize the secular, to give the stuff of getting and spending a transcendental affect. Ultimately, that is what the Industrial Revolution was finally all about—not just making things, but making meaning for things.

Seen from this point of view, the Industrial Revolution did not suddenly make us want things and the stories that went along with them. The Industrial Revolution was the result of our materialism, not the cause of it. But we do not always know what we want. If we knew what things meant, then we could choose things on the basis of some inner need. But we do not know. So, in a sense, we are not materialistic enough! That is why stories-brands can get in between us and the objects. We desperately want meaning, things cannot supply it, and so we install it. That is why branding (and Romantic poetry) works.

Such an irony, Colin Campbell admits, that Romanticism, the putative enemy of material consumption, should have paved the way for the marketing of excess stuff by foregrounding the life of sensation, privileging the process of daydreaming, and encouraging the attribution of spiritual yearning to the nonreligious world. In splitting the personality into active and contemplative and praising the latter, in foregrounding fiction and reneging on reason, in making impulse and emotion acceptable, in valuing loitering and drifting, and in encouraging solipsism and the rise of the individual response, the enemies of getting and spending made the Industrial Revolution of getting and spending possible. Technology may have provided the machines, but the Romantic poets loaded the software.

WHERE WE ARE NOW

The process is still unfolding. Clearly something has happened between my earlier view of cultural literacy (the rain-
bow) and Baseballcap’s (the golden arches). At a simplistic level we have, it seems, exchanged knowledge of history and science (a knowledge of book learning) for knowledge of products and how such products interlock to form coherent social patterns (a knowledge of brands). Where narratives used to cluster around abstract concepts like nationalism, ancestry, history, art, and afterlife, the dominant modern stories cluster around such stuff as cigarettes, sugar water, beer, and car tires. Think of it: even the simplest things like meat patties, coffee, denim, sneakers, gasoline, water, credit cards, television networks, batteries, and airplanes have deep drum-rolling stories behind them. The stories are linked into cycles, some lasting for generations, some changing every few months.

In a sense, brand stories have become modern sagas. While a saga is a format usually associated with frozen families huddled around a campfire in Scandinavia telling stories about swords and monsters, it might be productive to let it thaw a bit and consider the saga in the context of commercial branding. In so doing we provide both a recognized pedigree and a context in which to understand how we talk about manufactured things.

Since the traditional saga is transmitted orally, the story picks up and discards subplots and characters as it is being continually reformed for new audiences. In fact, the real saga format is interactive. In lit-crit jargon, it is called “dialogic.” The saga is formed of give and take between audience and storyteller in which the audience clearly participates in the choice of subplots. Rather like telling your kids a good-night tale where the kids say, “Tell us Little Red Riding Hood but this time really describe the wolf’s teeth,” so the sagameister cocks an ear in the telling. Hence all the variants. The process is rather like an advertising campaign in which there is a continual shuffling of idioms. Think the Absolut campaign, the Energizer Bunny’s endless adventures, or Coke’s shuffling of claims.

Generations ago we knew where we were by bloodline ancestry, by religious affiliation, by marriage partner, by similar lines on the vita, by job description, by club, and by accent. Today we know where we are by what saga we are consuming. So we move through choice of car, designer suit, handbag, or vacation spot as we move through stages of life. Saga stories convey social place and purpose; they are attached to shifting objects, and we learn to understand them finger-snap fast. Here is a throwaway line from the BBC sitcom Absolutely Fabulous that illustrates how compressed our knowledge has become. Edwina receives a gift of earrings from her daughter. “Are they Lacroix?” Edwina asks eagerly. “Do you like them?” asks her daughter. “I do if they’re Lacroix,” replies Edwina. The brandsaga does the work not just of characterization but also of worldview.

BRANDS AS GATED COMMUNITIES

Brands are not just the new Esperanto, they are the new emotional triggers and social markers. Edwina knows that. So does Baseballcap. What matters is what is not matter. What marks the modern world is that certain brand fictions have been able to generate a deep and almost instantaneous bond between consumers. We speak of brand families of manufactured objects, never really appreciating that such families may well extend into the human sphere—the true brand extension. We use the term “brand loyalty” without appreciating the power of what such affiliation really means.

We all know from the way that certain automobile owners wave at each other solely on the basis of the brand of car they drive (e.g., Saab), how certain computer users form chat groups that extend friendship beyond simple discussion of shared equipment or operating systems (e.g., Apple or Linux), how the alumni of certain schools seem to bond even if they were not in the same class (Dartmouth College), and even how dog owners will cross busy streets to chat with someone with the same breed, but we do not know exactly what to make of this meaning.

While we may recognize cult-community status woven around such disparate brandsagas as the Mazda Miata, Krispy Kreme donuts, Zippo lighters, Jeeps, Tupperware, various cigars and wines, to say nothing of the entire communities created by designer-label clothing like Hilfiger, Gucci, Armani, and Ralph Lauren, we do not know where these stories are taking us. Often even a simple product can attain such status solely on the basis of seeming exclusivity. Remember how Coors beer used to be the magical brand in the 1970s, even starring in a movie in which Burt Reynolds risked life and limb to transport it to Atlanta? Or what Nike running shoes used to be like?

Often ownership is self-consciously fetishized as with Harley Davidson. As has been pointed out, any brand that encourages its acolytes to literally transfer the logo onto their body as a tattoo, any brand that has believers using the owner’s manual as a Bible for marriage ceremonies, any brand that has pilgrimage celebrations like the various Bike Weeks, any brand that has a version of the Ford pickup truck fitted out with a cargo bed specially designed to coddle the bike, well, whatever that brand is, it is getting almost religious.

BRANDS AS RELIGIOUS STORIES

If you listen to the language of marketing you will often hear revelations of this process of sanctification via consumption. You will hear words like “brand soul” and “brand icon.” This may be more than self-serving gobbledygook. We are now, it seems to me, in the process of spiritualizing commercial brands. After all, that is what luxury is all about. Luxe consumption is becoming sacred with certain almost teleological brands. Whatever it was that had our medieval forefathers believing that this relic was the knucklebone of a saint and that it had mystical power is still operating in the land of deluxe. How else to explain something so irrational as Evian water, a Dior purse, or a Martha Stewart rolling pin?

High-end brands mimic the promise of religious metaphors and analogies. Transient materialism. Secular epiphany. Yes, brand owners talk about the soul of their brands, brand aura, and of their brands as icons, to be sure. By this they mean that their brands have a symbolic, almost a re-
religious significance, which goes way beyond their worth as products. The key thing is to worship them, not in any formal church sense but in a marketplace sense. Can brand advertising then be considered a kind of mantra, in which the repetition of the brand has an incantational power? Might this partially explain the shocking revelation some years ago that street kids were literally killing each other for their shoes or sports jackets?

If you look at the stories we share, I mean really share—so much so that we cannot even remember how we learned about them—you will see something rather startling. These stories invariably have deep roots in mythology. Take the cartoon characters or identification characters of commercial products, for instance. The Jolly Green Giant seems a mimic of the giant of lore, the Pillsbury Doughboy seems the perpetual jester, Tony the Tiger is the affable lion, characters in advertisements for light beer seem to be pranksters of various kinds while performers in sneaker ads are like Olympian heroes, Harley Davidson users are portrayed as eternal outlaws, blue jeans wearers are often going-where-none-have-gone-before explorers, the Marlboro man invokes the independent outsider, Betty Crocker the archetypical good mother, and so on. Brandsagas, while shallow, are usually drawn from the preliterate or the preprint world. All right, they may not be the hero with a thousand faces, but they are from the same family.

Of course we fetishize the world with a brand mythology. How else could we endure it? Could it be that brands are becoming the necessary iconic equipment used to cross liminal space, like the transition between adolescence and adulthood, from single to married, from nonfamily to reproductive, from job to retirement, from condemned to saved? Are they now doing the social work of organized religion? Why should we think that rituals, tribes, rites of passage, incantations, and other such terms of cultural transition should not also apply to us? Do we not also desire to transcend the material world and experience satisfaction of life by consuming material stuff?

And that, it seems to me, is the future of commercial brands and why Baseballcap got it right. The narratives of stuff, the fictions surrounding machine-made objects, are providing the cultural literacy necessary to form community. As with other stories, brandsagas are inclusive and exclusive. What separates our modern sense of community from others that have come before is that the ability to enter these communities depends not on lucky birth, skin color, religious affiliation, or a host of other attributes usually installed at birth but a desire to consume both objects and their fictions. I have glossed over the obvious problems of such a culture (clearly, it is wasteful and intellectually shallow for starters), but it may prove to be more fair and democratic than what has come before. Who knows? But this is a question that much of the world currently seems intent on deciding.

[Dawn Iacobucci served as editor for this article.]

REFERENCES

